

Skin Cancer

By Murphy Vestute, May 2002

Skin cancer accounts for 40% of all cancers and is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in the U.S. It was estimated in Florida that 3,800 cases of melanoma were diagnosed (during 2001).

Anyone can get skin cancer. Excessive exposure to the sun is the main cause of skin cancer. However, there are risk factors you should be aware of: age, moles that change shape, having a fair complexion, personal/family history of melanoma, severe sunburns, unusual shaped moles.

Basal cell and squamous cell carcinomas are common types of skin cancer. They are slow growing, highly curable and seldom spread to other areas of the body. These two skin cancers often take the form of a pale, wax-like, pearly nodule, or a red, scaly, sharply outlined patch. They are not usually life-threatening.

Melanoma is less common, but a more serious skin cancer. The incidence rate for malignant melanoma has more than doubled in the past twenty years! Melanomas often start as small, mole-like growths that increase in size and change color. They can spread to other areas of the body, and can be difficult to treat once vital internal organs are reached. It is not well understood what causes melanoma; however, it can be easily cured when detected early.

The best way to detect skin cancer in its early stage is to recognize changes in your skin. What to look for: changes in the size/color of a mole, the appearance of new growths, sores that do not heal, signs of scaliness, oozing or bleeding; changes in the appearance of bumps. Pay particular attention to the spread of pigmentation beyond its border, a change in sensation, itchiness, tenderness or pain.

The simple **ABCD** rule will help you recognize important signs of melanoma: **A, asymmetry** – one half of a mole does not match the other half. **B, border irregularity** – edges are ragged, notched or blurred. **C, color** – pigmentation is not uniform. **D, diameter** is great than 6 millimeters. If any sudden or progressive increases in size should occur, contact your doctor, preferably a dermatologist.

To help protect against skin cancer, avoid sun exposure when UV rays are the strongest – 10am to 4pm. Avoid indoor sunlamps, tanning salons and tanning pills. Wear protective clothing (i.e., large-brimmed hats, long-sleeved shirts, long pants/skirts, sunglasses). Use SPF 15 or higher, but look for screens that block both UVA and UVB rays. Do a monthly skin self-exam.

Remember: Sunscreen for children less than 6 months old is NOT recommended. Infants should be covered up with clothing and kept in the shade!